

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Exorcising the Ghosts of Prescott from Conquest Historiography

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This essay reviews the following works:

Collision of Worlds: A Deep History of the Fall of Aztec Mexico and the Forging of New Spain. By David M. Carballo. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xvi + 351. \$37.99 hardcover, \$23.99 paperback, e-book. ISBN: 9780197661451.

Conquistadores: A New History of Spanish Discovery and Conquest. By Fernando Cervantes. New York: Viking, 2021. Pp. vxiii + 496. \$35.00 hardcover, e-book. ISBN: 9781101981269.

Inca Apocalypse: The Spanish Conquest and the Transformation of the Andean World. By R. Alan Covey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xix + 592. \$34.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780190299125.

Death in the Snow: Pedro de Alvarado and the Illusive Conquest of Peru. By George W. Lovell. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. Pp. xv + 280. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780228014409.

Strike Fear in the Land: Pedro de Alvarado and the Conquest of Guatemala, 1520–1541. By W. George Lovell, Christopher H. Lutz, and Wendy Kramer. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020. Pp. xvi + 194. \$32.95 hardcover, \$21.95 paperback, e-book. ISBN: 9780806190044.

German Conquistadors in Venezuela: The Welsers' Colony, Racialized Capitalism, and Cultural Memory. By Giovanna Montenegro. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022. Pp. xvii + 372. \$95.00 hardcover, \$75.99 e-book. ISBN: 9780268203214.

Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest. By Matthew Restall. Updated edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xix + 272. \$21.99 paperback. ISBN: 9780197537299.

Conquistadors and Aztecs: A History of the Fall of Tenochtitlan. By Stefan Rinke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. ix + 328. \$34.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780197552469.

When Spaniards arrived on Indigenous lands in what became known as the Americas, they referred to their military conflicts with the original inhabitants as “conquests.” Their sensationalized stories of a few ironclad and bearded men fearlessly fighting hordes of

Indigenous warriors have fascinated reading publics for generations. Of course, the Spanish occupation of the Americas did not entirely unfold in the way conquistadors claim in their written accounts. Yet for much of the past five centuries, scholars have followed in their footsteps by persistently posing the same misleading question: How did a small group of Spaniards defeat the armies of massive Indigenous empires? In contrast, this group of eight books asks how a wide range of conquistadors and other forced auxiliaries—from various ethnic backgrounds and of different genders—came together in complex alliances for varying self-serving reasons. The authors do not assign clear “winners” and “losers” rooted in providential readings of the past, racist ideas of civilization over barbarism, or more popular interpretations based on technology and disease. They call for a more careful reading of early modern cultures in the Atlantic world to understand both the actions of the conquistadors and Indigenous responses to the arrival of foreigners on their territories.

This cluster of new books is indebted to two major trends in colonial Latin American historiography: New Philology and New Conquest History. Building on the pioneering linguistic work of James Lockhart (1933–2014) from the 1970s onward, who himself drew on the intellectual labor of Mexican Mesoamericanists, several scholars began to turn to an array of alphabetic materials in Indigenous languages from various archives in the United States, Mexico, and Europe.¹ Working with these sources revealed other Indigenous responses to colonialism unavailable in painted pictographs as much as it allowed researchers to move beyond both a purely Spanish perspective of conquest and Miguel León-Portilla’s (1926–2019) popularized “vision of the vanquished.”² This difficult paleographic and philological labor became the basis for New Conquest History in the 1990s, which reads new archival materials critically to combat the triumphalist tone of conquistadors and other colonial chroniclers. New Conquest History also emphasizes the roles of multiple actors in conquest—specifically Indigenous conquistadors—and other peripheral regions of the Americas that have been overshadowed by the central areas of the Mexica and Inca empires.³

Myths of conquest

While several scholars have made important contributions to New Conquest History, Matthew Restall is arguably the most recognizable, given the success of *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Originally published in 2003, the book was Restall’s attempt to address many of the popular misconceptions of the Spanish invasion he was encountering in his lecture halls. The book became an instant classic, was listed as one of the best history books of 2003 by *The Economist*, has been translated into several languages, and is still used widely in university teaching. An updated edition was released in 2021, the five hundredth anniversary of the fall of Tenochtitlan. Restall interrogates seven enduring interpretations of Spanish conquest by turning to colonial texts, Indigenous codices, Hollywood movies, and even Gary Larson’s comics. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* is a pleasure to read and, together with many of Restall’s other works, continues to shape conquest studies for regions across the Americas even if many of his examples are from Mexico.

Restall’s seven myths—which he defines as “something fictitious that is commonly taken to be true, partially or absolutely” (xvi)—are well known but still merit brief review. They can be grouped into three categories, the first (chapters 1–3) being myths about the

¹ His culminating work is *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

² Miguel León-Portilla, *Visión de los vencidos: Relaciones indígenas de la Conquista*, trans. Ángel María Garibay K. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1959). His work was translated into English by Lysander Kemp as *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

³ The historiography is growing and too large to cite here. For a nice overview, see Matthew Restall, “The New Conquest History,” *History Compass* 10, no. 2 (2012): 151–160.

historical role of conquistadors in the sixteenth century. Instead of seeing them as a small group of adventurers led by “great men” who were fighting on behalf of the Spanish crown, Restall argues that conquistadors were free agents who were only later transformed into royal soldiers. Some of them were Spanish women, a significant number were Black Africans, and many more were Indigenous peoples. Two myths (chapters 4 and 6) are about larger imperial processes that spanned the entire period of Spanish colonial rule. Conquest, Restall argues, was ongoing and never complete in the sixteenth century, and while Indigenous communities experienced severe depopulation, they were not all destroyed—nor did they descend into a state of anomie. The final two myths (chapters 5 and 7) cover societal differences between Spanish and Indigenous communities. Restall questions interpretations of Spanish ascendance in the Americas that are built on the assumption that European societies were superior to Indigenous ones, whether rooted in imagined cultural hierarchies based on writing systems or in other technological advancements.

In a wise decision, Restall made no changes to his first edition, claiming that he did not want to “disguise” his “original thinking” (x). Instead, he offers a short yet informative afterword charting his intellectual journey, together with an expanded bibliography. Restall challenges scholars to write narratives of conquest in which monumental figures like Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), and Francisco Pizarro (1478–1541) are not at the center and in which minorities are fully integrated instead of sidelined into historiographical ghettos. Readers will be impressed by Restall’s vulnerability as a historian because he reveals some of his own shortcomings. For example, he recognizes that he was not skeptical enough with his primary sources, whether Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s (1492–1584) description of the Valley of Mexico or Bernardino de Sahagún’s (1499–1590) “ethnographic” works on Nahua culture. In terms of language, he admits that he should have used “teenage sex slave” instead of “involuntary mistress” (169) to describe Indigenous interpreters like Malintzin (c. 1500–c. 1529) and that “native allies” (170) is Hispanocentric, given that many local leaders were the ones who forged alliances with Spaniards and not the other way around.

Despite Restall’s own self-criticism and some initial pushback in early book reviews, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* has aged well because the work weaves together popular perceptions and scholarly debates in an accessible manner for a wide range of readers. More importantly, the central points of the book remain relevant for today, specifically Restall’s call for a more inclusive history of the conquest that is applicable to the larger history of Latin America and current drives for diversity and inclusion in university curricula. Restall, for instance, suggests in his afterword, “It now looks old-fashioned, to say the least, for any study of colonial Latin America to ignore, marginalize, or silo the Indigenous peoples that lived in the region under study” (162). The authors of the rest of the books under review in this essay have largely moved beyond these “old-fashioned” histories, questioning Spanish and Indigenous sources from colonial times while simultaneously wrestling with nineteenth-century ways of narrating the European invasion of the Americas.

Conquest as collision

The so-called conquests of Mexico and Peru have largely been told as narratives in which action flows from one side of the Atlantic to the other.⁴ Following in the footsteps of the Romantic historian William Hickling Prescott (1796–1895), subsequent writers have claimed that Spaniards came, they conquered, and then they set up imperial institutions.⁵

⁴ Historians increasingly call these two events the Spanish-Mexica (or Aztec or Mesoamerican) War and the conquest of the Inca Empire or Tawantinsuyu.

⁵ William Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico, with a Preliminary View of the Ancient Mexican Civilization, and the Life of the Conqueror, Hernando Cortés*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1843), and *History of the Conquest of*

European men—strong, brave, intelligent, resourceful, and technologically advanced—were the major actors in this imperial drama; Indigenous peoples played secondary roles as either barbarous enemies who had no chance because of cultural and environmental factors or victims of Black Legend cruelty. If writers bothered to describe the inhabitants of the Mexica and Inca empires, they often assumed that they were inferior and focused on the more sensational elements of their religion. David M. Carballo takes an entirely different approach in *Collision of Worlds: A Deep History of the Fall of Aztec Mexico and the Forging of New Spain*. Written from an archaeological perspective, Carballo turns to material things, treating the lands Spaniards invaded as excavation sites to examine “layers of occupation” (5). Offering “deep histories” of Mesoamerica and Iberia, he presents conquest as a “meeting of two worlds” (1) that developed independently of each other, worlds that each deserve due attention and that became entangled because of global processes taking place in the early modern period.

Carballo’s account of the Spanish-Mexica War departs from the Prescottian tradition of exoticizing the Mexica for dramatic effect. In many conquest histories, the purpose of describing Indigenous societies on the eve of contact serves an important yet Eurocentric narrative function: it signals to the reader the type of warriors the Spanish conquistadors were up against. By way of contrast, Carballo dedicates half of *Collision of Worlds* to describing Mesoamerican and Iberian cultures before they formed alliances and waged war on each other (chapters 2–4). He treats both civilizations as “other” by highlighting several “striking parallels” (96) between them as well as other defining differences. His long list covers themes such as empire building, writing systems, social stratification, religious customs, urban statistics, market economies, agricultural practices, warrior cultures, technological innovations, educational habits, and political organization. What emerges from Carballo’s comparisons are two highly urban groups of religious people who transitioned from rock painting to writing systems, and whose hierarchical and military societies were led by mytho-historical leaders to establish vast empires out of fractured and independent political units.

When Carballo finally gets into his version of the Spanish-Mexica War (chapters 5–7), readers will notice a major difference from other conquest histories because he weaves archaeological information into his narrative. He covers the transition from Indigenous to Spanish colonial material culture in the Caribbean by pointing to an encomienda owned by Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566). As he follows the conquistadors to the coast of Mexico, Carballo references digs near cenotes in the Yucatán Peninsula and underwater teams surveying the waters around Veracruz for shipwrecks. As the conquistadors take steps inland, Carballo points to experimentation with Tlaxcalan weaponry and uses architectural remains from Ixtacamaxtitlán to counter Bernal Díaz’s claims about skull racks and military equipment. And when the conquistadors arrive at the temple of Quetzalcoatl in Cholula or Moctezuma’s (c. 1466–1520) palace in Tenochtitlan, Carballo draws upon the material remains from various excavations to offer a more detailed picture of their grandeur.

To highlight what Restall calls the “myth of completion,” Carballo concludes (chapter 8) with a brief overview of the origins of New Spain instead of abruptly ending with scenes of smoke rising from the rubble of Tenochtitlan or the subsequent career of Cortés. He focuses on the idea of hybridity, arguing that the emerging viceroyalty was a “dynamic hub” (230) of cultural creation that included Mesoamerican, European, African, and Asian elements. Looking at the “multiethnic conquest” (231) companies fanning out from the former Mexica capital, Carballo stresses that Mesoamericans had a major role in expanding the Spanish empire and hence played an integral part in the emergence of

Peru, with a Preliminary View of the Civilization of the Incas, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847), have had a major influence on conquest historiography.

global systems of commerce and cultural exchange. New work by art historians and scholars of religious conversion informs Carballo's vision of New Spain because he sees colonial urbanism as a cocreation, and he challenges the language of "spiritual conquest" by highlighting Indigenous reworkings of Catholic Christianity. Carballo's archaeological perspective will change the way scholars approach textual primary sources and accounts of Mesoamerican-Iberian encounters, but his overall version of the fall of the Mexica empire will receive mixed reviews. *Collision of Worlds* ultimately reads like a brief account of the Spanish-Mexica War—some 90 of 279 pages—sandwiched between hard-earned context building and a short survey of the early history of New Spain.

Conquistadors and Aztecs: A History of the Fall of Tenochtitlan offers a more compelling account of the Spanish-Mexica War, a version that incorporates many elements of New Conquest History into a condensed and highly readable narrative for scholars and undergraduate students alike. Rinke, much like Restall, is on a myth-busting mission to disentangle Cortés's life from the history of conquest. Even though he begins his account with Cortés as a teenager, he refuses to transform the Spanish-Mexica War into a biography of the Extremaduran captain. Cortés, according to Rinke, may have been a man with organizing talents and charisma, but he was just a "typical representative" (36) of hidalgos looking to make it in what they called the New World. In addition to moving past the Prescottian biographical interest in "great men," Rinke also challenges the idea that the conquest was a clash between Mesoamerican people eaters and Spanish genocidal monsters, both of which are gross mischaracterizations. His goal is to reveal the "complex process of alliances and negotiations" (6) between Indigenous and European peoples, which means taking the "autonomy and sovereignty of indigenous actors ... more seriously than has previously been the case" (7).

Rinke's organization is typical of many histories of conquest in that he covers early preparations in the Caribbean (chapters 1–2) before narrating the taking of Tenochtitlan (chapters 4–7). Unlike Carballo, he does not offer parallel comparisons of Mesoamerican and Iberian cultures; instead, for the most part he treats Indigenous peoples as only "other" by dedicating chapter 3 to Mexica culture and offering brief summaries of other local groups Spaniards allied with or fought against. Rinke takes the same approach as Carballo in his conclusion: he refuses to close his account with the fall of Tenochtitlan, which is why he ends by discussing subsequent conquests and their legacies (chapters 8–9). A refreshing characteristic of Rinke's version of conquest is the way he incorporates reflections, doubts, and uncertainties about his primary sources into his narrative. He references Spanish, Indigenous, and Mestizo textual sources, exposing exaggerations and interpretive problems in them and questioning the agendas of all writers. In certain cases, he suggests that some events cannot be explained even with multiple versions. The transparency in Rinke's narrative is lacking in many conquest histories, which are often simply reworkings of Cortés's letters with limited critical commentary on their rhetorical elements.

Rinke succeeds in offering one of the most inclusive histories of the Spanish-Mexica War to date. While his focus is still primarily on the interactions between Mexica warriors and Spanish conquistadors, he also stresses the importance of Indigenous cooks and porters, enslaved Tainos and Black Africans, and Spanish *conquistadoras*; they fought, acted as spies, scouted lands, dug canals, built huts, made meals, and were forced to provide translation services. Rinke mentions Indigenous translators by name—Melchorejo, Francisquillo, and Malintzin—and in many cases has them do the talking alongside Cortés. He also recognizes, without downplaying sexual violence, the crucial role Indigenous women played in marriage alliances. *Conquistadors and Aztecs*, like several studies in New Military History, shifts some of the focus away from military leaders and bloody spectacles on the battlefield to the lives of common soldiers and the devastating effects of war on noncombatants. Displaying a level of compassion missing from many

conquest histories, Rinke recognizes the “countless women and children” (192) lost in the fall of Tenochtitlan and other Indigenous allies who “froze to death and died of thirst during the exhausting marches” (245).

Indigenous peoples are not passive pawns in *Conquistadors and Aztecs*, nor are they simply Spanish allies. Mexica warriors appease their multiple gods for strength in combat while Spaniards pray to their triune deity for divine assistance. Spaniards look for auxiliaries to aid them in battle while Indigenous groups like the Totonacs or the Tlaxcalans join forces with the Spaniards because they find them useful for achieving their own political goals. In fact, Rinke stresses that some Nahuatl-speaking peoples saw an improvement in their lives—even if short-lived—after years of fighting to dethrone their former imperial masters. What many have dubbed the conquest of Mexico should more truthfully be called the conquest of Tenochtitlan, which for Rinke was the culmination of a larger Mesoamerican war. In *Conquistadors and Aztecs*, Rinke highlights multiple perspectives, which is why he refers to events like La Noche Triste (the Sad Night) as the Battle of the Toltec Canal. While his historiographical leveling offers a more nuanced narrative, Rinke knows that the entire story of conquest cannot be told from either side.

Historians are rewriting the Spanish occupation of the Andes in a similar fashion but with an even thinner documentary trail. R. Alan Covey begins *Inca Apocalypse: The Spanish Conquest and the Transformation of the Andean World* with some troubling observations. Few contemporaries left record of the final days of Inca rule and Spaniards who did not participate in the conquest wrote most of the printed accounts. Not only this, but while Western interpretations of the conquest are no longer overtly guided by scientific racism, a persistent emphasis on Spanish social and technological advantages reflects “an uncomfortable legacy” (28) in how modern-day readers interpret the fall of the Inca empire.⁶ They may no longer uphold racial superiority—a hallmark of the Prescottian tradition—as a driving interpretive factor, but their persistent emphasis on the mismatch between a few Spanish conquistadors and tens of thousands of Inca troops harkens back to “the values that nineteenth-century writers wove into their own versions of the story” (22). Building upon John Hemming’s emphasis on Indigenous protagonism in conquest, Covey seeks a history in which both Andean and European voices are heard.⁷ Covey, much like Carballo, views conquest as “the collision of two worlds that had their own beliefs and social logics” (28), and the beliefs that he is most interested in are religious. He writes what he calls an “apocalyptic history” because he focuses on the ways that religion—specifically supernatural interpretations of conquest and colonization—shaped European and Andean perspectives of the Spanish invasion of the Andes.

Inca Apocalypse is 519 pages, but only 30 percent of them deal with Spanish-Incan military conflicts and negotiations between Cajamarca and Cuzco. Covey devotes the first part of his book (chapters 1–4) to parallel histories of Andean and Iberian worlds before contact, drawing on archaeological findings in his comparative approach to question ancient myths in both regions. Despite the many differences in their religious systems, Covey suggests that early modern Andean pilgrims would have found several points of similarity with Iberian Catholics. They both had a mythological attachment to the past, they performed purification rites for religious festivals, they practiced pilgrimage to holy sites, they believed in ancient sacred power, and they had supernatural theories about the end of the world. In both the Andes and Iberia, political leaders drew on religion for their authority and to expand their empires, whether the Incas in the Amazonian lowlands or the Spaniards in the Canary Islands. They both looked for signs of impending doom, which

⁶ He specifically points to Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).

⁷ John Hemming, *The Conquest of the Incas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983).

is why Spanish Catholics gave special meaning to the year 1492 and the Cuzco nobility interpreted conquest as the destruction of their universe.

Covey dedicates the central part of *Inca Apocalypse* (chapters 5–8) to the conquest of the Inca empire. Instead of interpreting the capture of Atahualpa (c. 1502–1533) at Cajamarca as the crowning achievement of the Spanish invasion, he views it as the “flowing together of two worlds” (192). Downplaying Jared Diamond’s attention to technology and disease, Covey emphasizes the “small number of Spaniards” (295) and provides examples of Incas capturing horses and forcing captive Spaniards to make gunpowder. At every turn he incorporates New Conquest History into his narrative by recognizing the contributions of Andean soldiers and Afro-Peruvians, both of whom fought alongside various Spanish factions. He shines light on the role of slavery—both Indigenous and African—in conquest, suggesting that the dreadful institution “was part of the design of the Spanish colony in Peru” (280). In his telling, Vilcabamba is not so much a kingdom in exile as it is a strategic point of continued Indigenous resistance. While Covey offers many important correctives in *Inca Apocalypse*, his emphasis on Indigenous women is his most important contribution to conquest studies. Throughout his book Incas surround themselves with powerful noblewomen, who are not background furniture but central figures for establishing political power in Tawantinsuyu. Covey recognizes the “unrestrained sexual violence” (285) of the conquistadors, but also underscores the ways Andean women made strategic marriage alliances with prominent Spaniards.

Instead of concluding with the civil wars between competing factions among the conquistadors, Covey, much like Carballo and Rinke, finishes his work (chapters 9–12) with a review of the imposition of Spanish colonial rule. He focuses on the early missionary theater in Peru and the viceroy Francisco de Toledo’s (1515–1582) quest to strip Andeans of their sovereignty. In this part of his book, religious conversion, testimony gathering, racialized work regimes, resource extraction, forced resettlement, legal records, and even food and drink are all elements of “Toledan attempts to conquer Andean landscapes” (454). Conquest, then, is not simply what steel-plated Spaniards do on the battlefield, like in the Prescottian tradition, or even what robed mendicant evangelizers do on the mission field. Processes of conquest include Spanish colonial administrators and settlers who rewrite Inca history, burn land titles, and uproot Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands. These colonial patterns can be identified across the Andean world, but less attention has been paid to the initial phases in the northern stretches of Tawantinsuyu.

Death in the Snow: Pedro de Alvarado and the Illusive Conquest of Peru is a microhistory of an often-overlooked episode of the Spanish invasion: Pedro de Alvarado’s (c. 1485–1541) failed attempt to take control of the northern part of the Inca empire (1534–1535). W. George Lovell follows the career of the infamous conquistador throughout the early modern Spanish world, shedding new light on his expedition from the Pacific coast of Guatemala to the eastern side of the Andes Mountains of central Ecuador. Given that authors of most histories of the conquest of Peru—like Covey and Cervantes—reference this event only in passing, *Death in the Snow* fills in an important gap in the literature. But more than simply illuminating a marginal historical episode, Lovell’s underlying task—much like in his other works—is to reflect on the “calamitous consequences for Indigenous peoples” (xiii). His archival findings are a clear call to avoid siloing Mesoamerican and Andean studies when approaching the history of conquest and colonialism in Spanish America. In other words, the original inhabitants of Central America cannot be ignored in the narrative of imperial Spain in South America.

Composed of brief chapters divided into five parts, *Death in the Snow* is a short book of ninety-seven pages with roughly just as many notes. In the first two parts, Lovell reviews Alvarado’s relationship to Cortés, his restless character, and his expeditionary preparations in Spain, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Shifting to Ecuador, in the following

two parts he covers Alvarado's movements from Cáraquez to Ambato, a zigzagging trek in which Spaniards—together with enslaved Indigenous and Black peoples—ransacked local populations and experienced a disastrous crossing of the snow-filled Andes between Chimborazo and Carihuairazo, only to discover that Diego de Almagro (c. 1475–1538) had already founded Santiago de Quito. In the final part, Lovell focuses on Alvarado's negotiations with Almagro, their discussions with Pizarro in Pachacamac, and Alvarado's eventual return to Guatemala. In his telling, Alvarado's Peruvian expedition was a “doomed venture” (97) carried out by a reckless, impetuous man with an “explosive temperament” (8) and notorious reputation for his “blatant abuse of Indigenous populations” (19).

Lovell's analysis is rooted in the archives. There is not a lot to work with, but there is enough correspondence, bills of sale, cabildo records, *relaciones*, colonial chronicles, documentary compilations, and a roll call (transcribed in the appendix) to give flesh to the story. Even with such an array of primary sources, Lovell's central focus in *Death in the Snow* is still Alvarado. Given the lack of records by Indigenous peoples, not to mention the tendency of Spaniards to either ignore or underestimate their numbers, Lovell was unable to write an account—like Carballo, Rinke, and Covey—with multiple perspectives. He was, however, still able to build on the emphases of New Conquest History by highlighting Indigenous agency. Tlaxcalans and other Nahuas “far outnumbered” (3) the Spaniards in the conquest of Guatemala, and Sebastián de Belalcázar (1480–1551) was accompanied by “thousands of Cañari warriors as auxiliaries” (67). Alvarado earns a hefty profit from “the toil of 1,500 Indigenous slaves” (30) and other tributaries, and he maintains a lengthy relationship with his Tlaxcalan wife Doña Luisa Tecuilvaztzin. Kaqchikels do the “heavy lifting” (24) building ships for Alvarado, and an Indigenous contingent from Guatemala and Nicaragua, along with “other helpers” (66), accompanies him to Ecuador only to meet “demise in the cold and snow of the Andes” (96). While Lovell is forced, at times, to treat the Indigenous peoples Alvarado forcibly recruited as mere victims, he records and explains their numbers—“a precise figure of 1,184” (42)—to remind us that their lives matter when recounting tales of conquest.

Conquest and cultural memory

Thus far, the books under review have centered on conflicts between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples in the conquests of Tenochtitlan and Tawantinsuyu. These regions were transformed into the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru, the central areas of Spanish occupation that have subsequently received the bulk of scholarly attention. What transpired in more peripheral regions, however, is just as important for understanding the Spanish invasion of the Americas. *Strike Fear in the Land: Pedro de Alvarado and the Conquest of Guatemala, 1520–1541* concentrates on the origins of Spanish colonial rule in Guatemala between 1523 and 1541 from both Spanish and Indigenous perspectives. Teaming together for another project, W. George Lovell, Christopher H. Lutz, and Wendy Kramer underscore even further Pedro de Alvarado's violent legacy in Central America, not to mention the crucial role his brother, Jorge de Alvarado (d. 1542), played in subjugating local Maya peoples.⁸ They also question the long-standing idea that the Kaqchikels were traitors—the “Tlaxcalans of Guatemala” (20)—by claiming that conquest was complex and “not at all clear-cut” (1), one of many reasons they refute the still-popular notion that Spanish victory was decisive by highlighting Indigenous resistance.

⁸ See also W. George Lovell, Christopher H. Lutz, Wendy Kramer, and William R. Swezey, *Strange Lands and Different Peoples: Spaniards and Indians in Colonial Guatemala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

Strike Fear in the Land includes four chapters, the first three dealing with Alvarado's war against the K'iche peoples (and later other Maya groups), his alliance with the Kaqchikels, and the eventual uprising by his former allies, led by the Kaqchikel kings Ahpozotzil Cahí Ymox (d. 1540) and Ahpoxahil Belehé Qat (d. 1532). The fourth chapter focuses on a second uprising led by Cahí Ymox, who joined forces with another Kaqchikel lord, Quiyavit Caok (d. 1540). Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer litter their narrative with block quotes from Spanish and Indigenous sources (specifically the *Memorial de Sololá*), picking them apart and pointing out inconsistencies and useful historical data in both. As they state in their preface, their goal is to provide equal attention to Indigenous agency, so they record time according to Maya and European calendars; recognize the role of Nahuatl-speaking conquistadors from Tenochtitlan, Cholula, Texcoco, Tlaxcala, and Xochimilco; and stress Maya resistance to Spanish incursions. Following New Conquest History, Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer ultimately recognize that the conquest of Guatemala—much like in Mexico or Peru—was as “much (and at times more) an Indigenous enterprise as a Spanish one” (37).

Although Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer highlight Indigenous perspectives, they are not afraid to question treasured national narratives in Guatemala. According to K'iche accounts, Pedro de Alvarado killed the K'iche lord Tecún Umán in battle outside Quetzaltenango in 1524. The Guatemalan military and government, not to mention members of resurgent Maya movements, have transformed Tecún Umán into a symbol of resistance and pride, remembering him in school texts, ritual dances, the national currency, and various statues. Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer, however, note that many scholars see him as a mythical figure, given that no K'iche texts from the time of encounter reference him and that Spaniards began to record his name only in the late seventeenth century. They are more inclined to place someone like Cahí Ymox in the “laurels of conquest history” (93), and they make their claim on the basis of the second and third books of the *cabildo* of Santiago de Guatemala. Long believed to have been lost, these documents are housed in the Hispanic Society of America in New York and provide evidence that Cahí Ymox led a second Kaqchikel uprising against Spanish rule between 1533 and 1535.

Four appendixes appear at the end of *Strike Fear in the Land*, two of which are timelines of the chronology of conquest in Guatemala and the whereabouts of Pedro de Alvarado. What appear to be mere historical aids are conceptual tools for rethinking processes of conquest. Between 1523 and 1541, the Adelantado—often hailed as “the conqueror of Guatemala” (111)—was in the region for a total of six and half years. Jorge brought more of Guatemala under Spanish control than his brother Pedro, so the tendency to assign one conquistador to a region of Spanish America distorts what happened on the ground. More importantly, it silences Indigenous participation, which is highlighted in the other two appendixes. Appendix C provides 27 of the 156 images from the *Historia de Tlaxcala*, an account Diego Muñoz Camargo (c. 1529–1599) wrote in 1585. The ones Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer selected primarily depict Spanish-Indigenous conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador. In all cases, Indigenous warriors on both sides outnumber the sole Spanish conquistador on horseback. The final appendix clarifies the lives of Cahí Ymox, Belehé Qat, and Quiyavit Caok, important Indigenous leaders who shaped the course of the Spanish invasion. Other actors in other peripheral regions, not all of them Indigenous, have also been underrepresented in histories of conquest.

In *German Conquistadors in Venezuela: The Welsers' Colony, Racialized Capitalism, and Cultural Memory*, Giovanna Montenegro offers a combined microhistory and cultural reading of the short-lived Welser governance of Venezuela between 1528 and 1556. She argues that Charles V and foreign merchant capitalists, specifically German banking families like the Welsers of Augsburg, were linked by “entangled webs of credit” (37) and an emerging racialized capitalism, one that saw Europeans enslaving millions of Indigenous peoples and

Black Africans to acquire sugar and gold. Drawing on chronicles, maps, photographs, statues, novels, plays, and other material objects, Montenegro highlights the ways in which cultural memory—on both sides of the Atlantic and across five centuries—shapes narratives of conquest and colonialism. Given that Spaniards saw Germans as an “alien force” in Venezuela, not to mention the limited number of Latin Americanists who read German, the Welser Company’s colonial activities are either entirely ignored or largely glossed over in histories of Latin America. *German Conquistadors in Venezuela* is Montenegro’s “attempt at combating this amnesia concerning Germany’s and Spain’s colonial past in Venezuela” (276).

There are three major parts to *German Conquistadors in Venezuela*, the first (chapters 1–2) being a historical sketch of the banking, slaving, and colonizing activities of the Welser Company. The second part (chapters 3–5) is a cultural analysis of literary and cartographic representations of the Welsers between the 1500s and 1700s, and the third part (chapters 6–7) provides a discussion of the conflicting ways Venezuelans and Germans have interpreted the legacies of German colonialism. Although Montenegro recognizes that her work is not an ethnographic history, it is a shame that she ignores the precontact history of Venezuela. Early in her narrative, Germans arrive to a place with no previous history and Indigenous peoples are largely capitalist commodities who are purchased and sold. Having said this, Montenegro still draws on New Conquest History by acknowledging the ways that Germans—much like Spanish conquistadors—used enslaved Indigenous and Black African peoples as guides and porters. She also highlights the “strategies of linguistic resistance” (84) that Indigenous translators used on German *entradas* and points out how colonial chroniclers ignored the sexual trafficking of Indigenous women.

Montenegro provides several important reminders in *German Conquistadors in Venezuela* that build on various trends in Latin American studies. She takes an Atlantic world perspective by recognizing the ways German experiences in the Near Atlantic and the Caribbean influenced their colonial activities in Venezuela. The Canary Islands may have been “a site for experimental conquest and colonization” (89) for the Spanish, but they were also a place where Germans learned about Spanish methods of conquest and engaged in capitalist ventures like sugar production. They were also involved in the early African slave trade, something the Welsers expanded on to include Indigenous peoples in both Santo Domingo and Venezuela. Montenegro acknowledges the entanglements of slave histories in the Americas by highlighting German participation in the transatlantic slave trade of Black Africans, the circum-Caribbean Indigenous slave trade, and the intra-Venezuelan slave trade. Against their will, these enslaved peoples participated in the conquest of Venezuela together with Germans like Nikolaus Federmann (1506–1542), who Montenegro suggests self-fashioned as a conquistador equal to Spaniards. Indeed, there were many types of conquistadors in the Spanish world, and not all of them were from the Iberian Peninsula.⁹

German Conquistadors in Venezuela is the only book in this cluster that takes a cultural studies approach to conquest. Montenegro’s work is a reminder of the varying levels of historical memory that one needs to sift through to interpret the European invasion of the Americas. On the one hand, there are competing (and unequal) Spanish, Indigenous, Black African, and Mestizo voices in the colonial archive, but on the other hand, there are more recent and conflicting national narratives in the Atlantic world. Perhaps the most eye-opening chapter for Latin Americanists will be Montenegro’s treatment of the “ghost of Welser Venezuela” (197) in modern Germany. Germans largely forgot about the Welser colony until the nineteenth century, when they used it as a justification and model for colonization in Africa. Various writers eulogized their activities in Venezuela, something

⁹ Justifications for colonization were similar across all European empires. See Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550–1700* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

that was taken to another level when Nazis portrayed the Welsers as “benevolent caretakers” and justified their role in the slave trade as a “charitable endeavor” (222). The cruelty of conquest does not have one stable meaning, nor is it always properly understood in its historical milieu.

Conquest and cruelty

Whether focused on the centers of viceregal power or the edges of the Spanish empire, most conquest studies are, like Prescott, regional in their approach. Given the emphasis on Indigenous experiences in New Conquest History, recent studies also highlight the devastation Spanish conquistadors had on an array of local peoples. In a toned-down Las Casian manner, they emphasize the cruelty of Spaniards, whether it was massacres, forced labor, enslavement, or sexual violence. Fernando Cervantes seeks to contextualize this cruelty in *Conquistadores: A New History of Spanish Discovery and Conquest* by analyzing conquest across most regions of Spanish America between 1492 and 1542. His major goal is to reconstruct the worldviews of the Spanish conquistadors, which for him means unpacking the religious cultures of the late medieval period in Europe. The understandable historical and contemporary “revulsion” toward conquistadors, Cervantes argues, in many cases tells us more about “our sense of shame” (xvi) regarding European colonialism than it does about the people who carried it out.

Conquistadores is organized into three parts. The first part (chapters 1–4) covers Columbus’s voyages, Nicolás de Ovando’s (1460–1511) government on Hispaniola, and the Spanish quest for justice in the Caribbean. In the second part (chapters 5–13), the narrative shifts to various waves of conquest in Cuba, Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru. The final part (chapters 14–16) focuses on the second phase of conquest in Peru, expeditions in Florida and New Granada, and the introduction of the New Laws (1542). Cervantes begins his history with Columbus on a mule in the countryside of Andalusia and hence does not sufficiently develop the patterns of conquest in the Near Atlantic, which were important models for conquest in the Caribbean and beyond. He makes no attempt to describe Indigenous cultures in any detail for any of the regions he covers and speaks of Spanish “discoveries” in the Americas without recognizing the pioneering work of Indigenous explorers. Cervantes does, however, engage with New Conquest History at various points in *Conquistadores*. He recognizes the role of Indigenous allies, highlights various forms of Indigenous resistance, breaks down “conquistador myth-history” (129), and questions Spanish understandings of local political structures.

While Cervantes does not shy away from pointing out the “great” (139), “unspeakable” (298), and “unparalleled” (309) cruelty of the conquistadors, his desire to move beyond the vision of them as “genocidal colonists” (xvi) has led to some unfortunate omissions. For example, in *Conquistadores*, Columbus is an eccentric man who, though convinced that he was a divine instrument of the Christian god, had “tangible scientific achievements” (53). Columbus is not, despite Cervantes’s brief references to slavery, the initiator of the larger circum-Caribbean Indigenous slave trade. Overall, Cervantes does not emphasize enough the forced participation of enslaved peoples in conquest and how the acquisition of slaves was a major motor propelling early Spanish expeditions.¹⁰ Women are also largely absent from his narrative, beyond important figures like Malintzin, and he ignores the rampant sexual exploitation characteristic of conquest. And when he looks at the missionary work of the mendicants, he recognizes their acts of repression and extirpation but overlooks the

¹⁰ For the circum-Caribbean Indigenous slave trade, see Erin Woodruff Stone, *Captives of Conquest: Slavery in the Early Modern Spanish Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

darker side of the mission economy: friars built and maintained their monasteries through forced labor.¹¹

Despite the documentary imbalances in the archives, a history of conquest that prioritizes one side of the story is not sufficient to move beyond “old-fashioned” ways of explaining the Spanish invasion. *Conquistadores*, it should be emphasized, is extremely captivating, rich in detail, and filled with many important correctives to popular views of the Requerimiento, Spanish approaches to conversion, and early modern European legal systems. One also appreciates Cervantes’s warning to move beyond easy arguments that blame all ills in Latin America today on a few hundred Iberians from the sixteenth century. He is right to point to the liberal reforms of the nineteenth century, which were brutal for Indigenous peoples and radically altered their traditional ways of life. But it is difficult to accept Cervantes’s argument that Spanish conquistadors, despite their many faults, “had succeeded, more or less through their own agency, in fundamentally transforming Spanish, and European, conceptions of the world in barely half a century” (345). What about the Indigenous allies, guides, translators, porters, and other enslaved Black Africans who made this possible?

Writing the history of conquest is by no means an easy task given the rhetorical conventions of sixteenth-century texts, archival silences, and competing visions—both in the past and in the present—of what conquest is, when it ends, and how to remember it. Nevertheless, the books under review in this essay provide some important reminders when recounting the Spanish invasion. One needs to listen to multiple voices, which means recognizing European, Indigenous, Black African, and Asian perspectives and participation. To achieve this task, one must be open to both material evidence excavated from the earth and textual evidence protected in libraries and archives, especially new findings that challenge previous assumptions. These objects and documents will largely highlight the deeds of powerful men, so it is crucial to integrate women and other minorities—specifically enslaved peoples—into histories of conquest. With a wider spectrum of the human population accounted for, one can move beyond the activity in combat zones and palaces to the deadly effects of conquest on everyday people. These were lasting consequences, so one can no longer abruptly end their narratives of conquest in 1521 or 1533. Indeed, the story needs to continue into the present, because even if many of the ghosts of Prescott have been exorcised from conquest historiography, they continue to haunt popular interpretations of the Spanish invasion of the Americas.

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¹¹ See Ryan Dominic Crewe, *The Mexican Mission: Indigenous Reconstruction and Mendicant Enterprise in New Spain, 1521-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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